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L.A. gets D+ grade for lifestyle February 4, 2005

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer

With soaring housing costs, bad schools, horrendous traffic jams and a dearth of well-paying jobs, Southern California's once-golden lifestyle continues to dim, a scorecard released Thursday by the regional planning agency shows.

The seventh annual State of the Region report by the Southern California Association of Governments ranks the quality of life in the region as a D-plus -- potentially failing.

Housing and air quality worsened in 2003, while the grades for traffic, education, household income and public safety remained static. And while the number of jobs in the six-county region rose by 14,000, personal income for its 17.7 million residents stayed flat.

"The fundamental issue this region faces ... is the income issue. Without an increase in wages and per capita income we're not going to have the resources to deal with these issues," said Mark Pisano, executive director of SCAG.

The report details a slate of interconnected problems plaguing Southern California.

Students perform below the national median on reading and math test scores, while 76 percent of residents do not have a college degree -- elements that limit their ability to get high-paying jobs.

Meanwhile, there has been an exodus of well-paying manufacturing jobs to less-expensive areas with lower-paying service jobs moving in. With less wealth, residents have to travel to far-flung suburbs to be able to afford a home, which then worsens congestion and pollution.

"How do you get out of this Catch-22?" said Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Burke. "We need better schools (in urban areas) so people won't have to move so far away and housing people can afford so they don't have to move so far away."

Southern California's housing earned a D -- the worst score since the SCAG report card was launched.

The value of construction permits hit \$15.5 billion in 2003, but still didn't keep up with growth and demand. From 2000 to 2003, the region issued 200,000 building permits, but the population grew by 1 million.

That led to a dramatic increase in the cost of housing, with prices jumping up to 30 percent in 2003. The median price at the end of that year was \$417,500, according to the California Association of Realtors, and had soared to \$474,480 by December 2004.

Only 26 percent of households in Los Angeles and 20 percent of households in Orange County could afford a median-price home in 2003. Even the Inland Empire became more costly, with only 38 percent of households able to buy a median-price home, compared with 43 percent in 2002.

"The issue of housing affordability, availability and accessibility goes to the core of our long-term economic health and quality of life," said Toni Young, who sits on the Port Hueneme City Council and is SCAG's first vice president.

"Virtually nothing is more sacred than the home, which in Southern California is becoming more and more difficult to attain each year."

SCAG officials said they are trying to tackle housing and related issues of traffic and air quality with the "2 percent strategy" -- a planning vision adopted last year that calls for more condominiums, town houses and denser development close to transit lines.

By analyzing development opportunity along major bus and train corridors, SCAG officials estimate they could build 400,000 more units.

Their goal is to move jobs closer to homes and homes closer to jobs. So far the cities of Ontario and South Pasadena and communities along the Gold Line have expressed interest in adopting that plan, Pisano said.

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